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INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0098
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHPOD/AMEMBASSY PODGORICA 1156

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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/SCE AND EUR/RPM

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRO'S PARLIAMENT ENDORSES DEPLOYMENT OF MEDICAL TEAM
TO ISAF

REF: (A) 08 PODGORICA 289 AND PREVIOUS (B) 08 STATE 83856

¶1. (SBU) On 17 December, the Montenegrin Parliament voted to authorize deployment of a three-person medical team to join NATO forces in Afghanistan. The doctor and two medical assistants will receive preparatory training in Macedonia prior to deploying in March. They will then link up with other Adriatic Charter member countries participating in ISAF, as part of a medical unit attached to a Czech military hospital in Kabul.

¶2. (U) Defense Minister Vucinic, addressing the Parliament on the day of the vote, explained that Montenegro's participation in the UN-sanctioned mission in Afghanistan demonstrates that Montenegro is a reliable international actor and partner. Opposition members of Parliament criticized the decision, however, arguing that the GoM is risking the lives of its military personnel, with little direct benefit to Montenegro. While not responding directly to the opposition, senior GoM officials, including Minister Vucinic in interviews with television and print journalists, have publicly elaborated the benefits for Montenegro of closer ties to NATO. They emphasized in particular NATO's importance to overall integration with Europe and to boosting the confidence of foreign investors in Montenegro's long term stability.

¶3. (SBU) In a conversation with DCM on 23 December, the Deputy Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs emphasized that the GoM views deployments to ISAF as a top priority for 2009. They were encouraged by NATO Force Planning Director Frank Boland's comments to the local daily Vijesti saying that deploying Montenegrin units to Afghanistan would send an important signal to NATO in advance of the Strasbourg summit. (At the same time, Boland said he could not predict how members would respond to Montenegro's request to join MAP.)

¶4. (SBU) The Deputy MoD added that the Ministry is intent on moving ahead with plans to train, equip and deploy infantry units in 2009. He said he would like to see combat training start in January to prepare the first of two platoons for deployment in the fall. If the training does in fact get underway in January, he said, it is possible the GoM could seek the requisite parliamentary authorization as early as March. He confirmed that this would require only a simple majority to pass. However, a senior Montenegrin military official told our DATT on 29 December that it was his understanding that the GoM will not request parliamentary authorization for further deployments until after rumored pre-term parliamentary elections. (Note: Local media have speculated about elections in late March or early April, after PM Milo Djukanovic said publicly on December 26 that the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists is considering early elections. As part of an

October 2007 compromise over Montenegro's new Constitution, parliamentary elections were supposed to be held in the fall of this year, rather than in fall 2010 as originally scheduled.)

15. (SBU) Comment: The parliamentary debate over the deployment of the medical team is a warm-up for the sharper clash likely when the GoM announces plans to deploy infantry units. One argument the GoM plans to make is that its soldiers are receiving thorough training and modern equipment, which will enhance their effectiveness and minimize the risk of casualties.

The USG must be ready to deliver quickly on its train and equip commitment, both to help the GoM make the case to Parliament and subsequently to ensure the deployment goes without a hitch, thereby strengthening the GoM's effort to build support for NATO among the citizens of Montenegro. End Comment.

KONTOS